

Charnel ground

A **charnel ground** (Sanskrit: श्मशान; IAST: śmaśāna; Tibetan pronunciation: durtrö; Tibetan: དུར་ཁྱོད, Wylie: *dur khrod*)^[1] is an above-ground site for the putrefaction of bodies, generally human, where

formerly living tissue is left to decompose uncovered.

Although it may have demarcated locations within it functionally identified as burial grounds, cemeteries and crematoria, it is distinct from these as well as from crypts or burial vaults.



A dancing gana, Dashavatara
temple, Deogarh

In a religious sense, it is also a very important location for sadhana and ritual activity for Indo-Tibetan traditions of Dharma particularly those traditions iterated by the Tantric

view such as Kashmiri
Shaivism, Kaula tradition,
Esoteric Buddhism, Vajrayana,
Mantrayana, Dzogchen, and the
sadhana of Chöd, Phowa and
Zhitro, etc. The charnel ground
is also an archetypal liminality
that figures prominently in the
literature and liturgy and as an
artistic motif in Dharmic
Traditions and cultures iterated
by the more antinomian and

esoteric aspects of traditional Indian culture.

India

Throughout Ancient India and Medieval India, charnel grounds in the form of open air crematoria were historically often located along rivers and many ancient famous charnel sites are now 'sanitized' pilgrimage sites (Sanskrit: tirtha) and areas of significant

domestic income through cultural tourism. However, proper "charnel grounds" can still be found in India, especially near large rivers banks and areas where abandoned people (without family) are cremated or simply left to decompose. These areas are often frequented by Aghoris, a Kapalika sect, that follows similar meditation techniques, as those thought by the 84

Mahasiddhas. A typical Aghori sadhana (at the charnel ground) lasts for 12 years.

Himalayan 'sky burial'

In the Himalaya where tillable topsoil for burial and fuel for cremation is scarce and a valuable commodity, the location of a so-called sky burial is identified with a charnel ground.^[2]

Sutrayana and Early Buddhism

In the Pali Canon discourses, Gautama Buddha frequently instructs his disciples to seek out a secluded dwelling (in a forest, under the shade of a tree, mountain, glen, hillside cave, charnel ground, jungle grove, in the open, or on a heap of straw).^[3] The Vinaya and Sutrayana tradition of the "Nine

Cemetery Contemplations"

(Pali: *nava sīvathikā-manasikāra*) described in the Satipatthana Sutta demonstrate that charnel ground and cemetery meditations were part of the ascetic practices in Early Buddhism.^[4]

'Cemetery contemplations', as described in Mahasatipatthana Sutta (DN: 22) and the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN: 10):

...have as their objects a corpse one or two or three days old, swollen up, blue-black in colour, full of corruption; a corpse eaten by crows, etc.; a framework of bones; flesh hanging from it, bespattered with blood, held together by the sinews; without flesh and blood,

*but still held together
by the sinews; bones
scattered in all
direction; bleached and
resembling shells;
heaped together after
the lapse of years;
weathered and
crumbled to dust.*

*At the end of each of
these contemplations*

there follows the conclusion: "This body of mine also has this nature, has this destiny, cannot escape it."

Similar are the 10 objects of loathsomeness (asubha q.v.).

Polysemy and metaphor

On the face of it or alternatively the cosmetic level, the charnel ground is simply a locality often chthonic where bodies are disposed of, either by cremation or burial.^[1] Though the charnel ground is to be understood as a polysemy and metaphor it must be emphasized that holy people as

part of their sadhana and natural spiritual evolution grappling with death, impermanence and transition did historically in India, China and Tibet as well as in other localities, frequent charnel grounds, crematoriums and cemeteries and were often feared and despised by people who did not understand their 'proclivities' (Sanskrit: anusaya).

From a deeper structural significance and getting to the substantive bones of the Vajrayana spiritual point of view however, the charnel ground is full of profound transpersonal significance. It represents the 'death of ego' (Sanskrit: atmayajna), and the end of:

- **attachment** (Sanskrit: Upādāna; Tibetan: len pa (<http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.ph>

p/len_pa).[☞]) to this body and life

- **craving** (Sanskrit: Tr̥snā; Tibetan: sred pa ([http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/sred_p](http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/sred_pa)a).[☞]) for a body and life in the future
- **fear of death** (Sanskrit: abhiniveśa)
- **aversion** (Sanskrit: dveṣa; Wylie: zhe sdang) to the

decay of 'impermanence'
(Sanskrit: anitya).^[1]

It is worth noting that
'attachment', 'craving', 'fear' and
'aversion' above cited in bold
font are somewhat
standardized and hence less-
rich lexical choices for the
semantic field represented by
the four of the 'Five Poisons'
(Sanskrit: pancha klesha) they
denote.

Prior to spiritual realization,
charnel grounds are to be
understood as terrifying places,
full of 'roaming spirits'
(Sanskrit: gana) and 'hungry.
ghosts' (Sanskrit: pretas)
indeed localities that incite
consuming fear. In a charnel
ground there are bodies
everywhere in different states
of decomposition: freshly dead
bodies, decaying bodies,

skeletons and disembodied bones.^[1]

Simmer-Brown (2001: p. 127)

conveys how the 'charnel ground' experience may present itself in the modern Western mindstream situations of emotional intensity, protracted peak performance, marginalization and extreme desperation:

In contemporary Western society, the charnel ground might be a prison, a homeless shelter, the welfare roll, or a factory assembly line. The key to its successful support of practice is its desperate, hopeless, or terrifying quality. For that matter, there are environments

*that appear prosperous
and privileged to others
but are charnel grounds
for their inhabitants –
Hollywood, Madison
Avenue, Wall Street,
Washington, D.C. These
are worlds in which
extreme
competitiveness, speed,
and power rule, and the
actors in their dramas*

*experience intense
emotion, ambition, and
fear. The intensity of
their dynamics makes
all of these situations
ripe for the Vajrayana
practice of the charnel
ground.*

— [6]

Denizens and
pastimes of the

charnel ground

- Shiva as Bhairava
- 'Outcastes' (Sanskrit: Chandala) literally cast out from the castes, outside the Varnashrama Dharma of the *status quo*.

Dancing



Ganapati, Maha Rakta

Tibetan representations of Ganesha show ambivalent or richly different depictions of him.^[7] In one Tibetan form he is shown being trodden under foot by Mahākala, a popular

Tibetan deity.^{[7][8]} Other depictions show him as the Destroyer of Obstacles, sometimes dancing.^[9] This play of Ganesha as both the "creator and remover of obstacles" as per his epithet as well in the two Vajrayana iconographic depictions of him as that which consumes (Maha Rakta) and that which is consumed (danced upon by Vignantaka) is

key to the reciprocity rites of the charnel ground.

Ganapati, Maha Rakta (Tibetan: tsog gi dag po, mar chen.

English: The Great Red Lord of Hosts or Ganas) is a Tantric

Buddhist form of Ganapati

(Ganesha) related to the

Chakrasamvara Cycle of

Tantras. The Sanskrit term

'rakta' holds the semantic field

of "blood" and "red. *This form of*

Ganapati is regarded as an emanation of Avalokiteshvara.

"...beside a lapis lazuli rock mountain is a red lotus with eight petals, in the middle a blue rat expelling various jewels, [mounted on his rat 'steed' (Sanskrit: vahana)] Shri Ganapati with a body red in colour, having an elephant face with sharp white tusks and possessing three eyes, black

hair tied in a topknot with a wishing-gem and a red silk ribbon [all] in a bundle on the crown of the head. With twelve hands, the six right hold an axe, arrow, hook, vajra, sword and spear. The six left [hold] a pestle, bow, khatvanga, skullcup filled with blood, skullcup filled with human flesh and a shield together with a spear and banner. The peaceful right and left hands are

signified by the vajra and skullcup filled with blood held to the heart. The remaining hands are displayed in a threatening manner. Wearing various silks as a lower garment and adorned with a variety of jewel ornaments, the left foot is extended in a dancing manner, standing in the middle of the bright rays of red flickering light." (Ngorchen

Konchog Lhundrup, 1497–
1557).^[10]



Vignantaka trampling or
dancing upon Vinayaka

This form of Ganapati belongs
to a set of three powerful
deities known as the 'mar chen
kor sum' or the Three Great Red
Deities included in a larger set
called 'The Thirteen Golden

Dharmas' of Sakya. The other two deities are Kurukulle and Takkiraja.

In depictions of the six-armed protector Mahakala (Skt: Shadbhuja Mahakala, Wylie: mGon po phyag drug pa), an elephant-headed figure usually addressed as Vinayaka is seen being trampled by the Dharma Protector, but he does not appear distressed. In Vajrayana

and cognate Buddhist art, He is depicted as a subdued god trampled by Buddhist deities like Aparajita, Parnasabari and Vignataka.

The Tibetan Ganesha appears, besides bronzes, in the resplendent Thangka paintings alongside the Buddha. In "*Ganesh, studies of an Asian God*," edited by Robert L. BROWN, State University of

New York Press, 1992, pp. 241 – 242, he wrote that in the Tibetan Ka'gyur tradition, it is said that the Buddha had taught the "Ganapati Hridaya Mantra" (or "Aryaganapatimantra") to disciple Ananda. The sutra in which the Buddha teaches this mantra can be found here [12] (<https://web.archive.org/web/20110708091500/http://ganesh.a.bravehost.com/index.html>).[↗]

The 'pastime' and 'play'
(Sanskrit: *lila*) of dancing and
its representation in charnel
ground literature and visual
representations is endemic:
Ganapati as son of Shiva,
Ganapati as Lord of Gana, the
demonic host of Gana, dancing
ganesha, dancing gana, the
dance of life and death, what is
dance but a continuum of
forms, dancing is energetic,
dancing is symbolic of spiritual

energy in iconography,
particularly chthonic imagery of
Dharmic Traditions. Energy
moves (and cycles) between
forms as does dance. The
'wheel' (Sanskrit: chakra,
mandala) in all its permutations
and efflorescence is a profound
Dharmic cultural artifact
enshrining the energetic dance
of the Universe. This is
particularly applicable in the
iconography of Nataraja and

the 'wrathful deities' (Sanskrit: Heruka) of Vajrayana which are depicted with a flaming aureole, a flaming wheel. This resonates with the deep symbolism of the mystery rite and folklore and folk custom and high culture of circle dances which approaches a human cultural universal. Namkhai Norbu, a famed Dzogchen master in the Bonpo tradition and the Dharmic Traditions of esoteric

Buddhism has revealed a number of terma (Tibetan) of circle dances such as the 'Dance of the Six Lokas of Samantabhadra'. The dance is a restricted initiatory rite and its process may not be disclosed as so doing would be a contravention of 'commitments' (Sanskrit: samaya) but it may be affirmed that the rite is enacted on a colourful mandala of the Five Pure Lights and the

'central point' (Sanskrit: bindu)
of the dance mandala is
illuminated with a sacred
candle known as the 'garbha'
(Sanskrit) within the
International Dzogchen
Community. This terma dance
is all clearly applicable to the
charnel ground when taken as
the 'wheel of becoming'
(Sanskrit: bhavachakra) which
generally is demarcated by six
distinct 'places' (Sanskrit: loka).

Aghora

Dattatreya the avadhuta, to whom has been attributed the esteemed nondual medieval song, the Avadhuta Gita, was a sometime denizen of the charnel ground and a founding deity of the Aghor tradition according to Barrett (2008: p. 33):

...Lord Dattatreya, an antinomian form of Shiva closely associated with the cremation ground, who appeared to Baba Kina Ram atop Girnar Mountain in Gujarat. Considered to be the adi guru (ancient spiritual teacher) and founding deity of Aghor, Lord Dattatreya offered

*his own flesh to the
young ascetic as prasād
(a kind of blessing),
conferring upon him
the power of
clairvoyance and
establishing a guru-
disciple relationship
between them.*

Barrett (2008: p. 161)
discusses the sadhana of the
'Aghora' (Sanskrit; Devanagari:
अघोर)^[12] in both its left and
right-handed proclivities and
identifies it as principally
cutting through attachments
and aversion and foregrounding
primordially, a view uncultured,
undomesticated:

*The gurus and disciples
of Aghor believe their*

*state to be primordial
and universal. They
believe that all human
beings are natural-born
Aghori. Hari Baba has
said on several
occasions that human
babies of all societies
are without
discrimination, that
they will play as much
in their own filth as*

with the toys around them. Children become progressively discriminating as they grow older and learn the culturally specific attachments and aversions of their parents. Children become increasingly aware of their mortality as they bump their

heads and fall to the ground. They come to fear their mortality and then palliate this fear by finding ways to deny it altogether. In this sense, Aghor sādhanā is a process of unlearning deeply internalized cultural models. When this sādhanā takes the form of shmashān

*sāadhanā, the Aghori
faces death as a very
young child,
simultaneously
meditating on the
totality of life at its two
extremes. This ideal
example serves as a
prototype for other
Aghor practices, both
left and right, in ritual
and in daily life.*

- Vetala (Sanskrit)
- Shaivites
- Practitioners of Anuyoga. The Anuyoga class of tantras of the Nyingmapa is understood as the "Mother Tantras" of the Sarma Schools, this class of literature is also known as "Yogini Tantras" and there is a voluminous Shaivite or

Shakta Tantra by the same name, Yoginitantra.

- In the dance of reciprocity that is the beauty and cruelty of the Mystery of living and dying, the rite of Ganachakra is celebrated, indeed all forms participate in the Ganachakra, there is nothing in the Three Worlds (Triloka) that is not a charnel ground...

Beer (2003: p. 102) relates how the symbolism of the khatvanga that entered esoteric Buddhism (particularly from Padmasambhava) was a direct borrowing from the Shaivite Kapalikas who frequented places of austerity such as charnel grounds and cross roads etcetera as a form of 'left-handed path' (Sanskrit: vamamarga) 'spiritual practice' (Sanskrit: sadhana):

The form of the Buddhist khatvanga derived from the emblematic staff of the early Indian Shaivite yogins, known as kapalikas or 'skull-bearers'. The kapalikas were originally miscreants who had been sentenced to a twelve-year term of

penance for the crime of inadvertently killing a Brahmin. The penitent was prescribed to dwell in a forest hut, at a desolate crossroads, in a charnel ground, or under a tree; to live by begging; to practice austerities; and to wear a loin-cloth of hemp, dog, or donkey-skin.

They also had to carry the emblems of a human skull as an alms-bowl, and the skull of the Brahmin they had slain mounted upon a wooden staff as a banner. These Hindu kapalika ascetics soon evolved into an extreme outcaste sect of the 'left-hand' tantric path (Skt.

vamamarg) of shakti or goddess worship. The early Buddhist tantric yogins and yoginis adopted the same goddess or dakini attributes of the kapalikas. These attributes consisted of; bone ornaments, an animal skin loincloth, marks of human ash, a

*skull-cup, damaru,
flaying knife, thighbone
trumpet, and the skull-
topped tantric staff or
khatvanga.*

— [14]

Sadhana

Sadhana in the charnel ground
within the Dharmic Traditions
may be traced to ancient
depictions of the chthonic

Shiva and his chimeric son Ganapati (Ganesha) who was decapitated and returned to life with the head of an elephant. In certain narratives, Shiva made the Ganesha 'lord of the gana' (Sanskrit: Ganapati). Such depictions of Shiva, Ganesha and the ganas are evident in literature, architectural ornamentation and iconography, etc. In the Indian traditions of Tantra the charnel

ground is very important. It must be remembered that the seat of Shiva and his locality of sadhana is the sacred Mount Kailasha in the Himalaya. In some non-Buddhist traditions of Ganachakra such as the Kaula the leader of the rite is known as 'ganapati', which is a title of respect. The Eight Great Charnel Grounds are important in the life of Padmasambhava. This is one definite way the

importance of the charnel
ground in sadhana entered and
became replicated in the
Himalayan Dharmic Tradition.
The charnel ground is a
particular place that holds
powerful teachings on
impermanence and is
important for slaying the ego.
In this, the charnel ground
shares with the tradition of dark
retreat that was foregrounded

in some Himalayan practice lineages.

Simmer-Brown (2001: p. 127)

conveys how great

Mahasiddha's in the Nath and

Mantrayana Buddhadharma

traditions such as Tilopa (988–

1069) and Gorakṣa (fl. 11th–

12th century) yoked adversity

to till the soil of the path and

accomplish the fruit, the

'ground' (Sanskrit: āśraya;

Wylie: gzhi)^[15] of realization –
worthy case-studies for those
with spiritual proclivity:

*The charnel ground is
not merely the
hermitage; it can also
be discovered or
revealed in completely
terrifying mundane
environments where
practitioners find*

*themselves desperate
and depressed, where
conventional worldly
aspirations have
become devastated by
grim reality. This is
demonstrated in the
sacred biographies of
the great siddhas of the
Vajrayāna tradition.
Tilopa attained
realization as a grinder*

*of sesame seeds and a
procurer for a
prominent prostitute.
Sarvabhakṣa was an
extremely obese
glutton, Gorakṣa was a
cowherd in remote
climes, Taṇtepa was
addicted to gambling,
and Kumbharipa was a
destitute potter. These
circumstances were*

*charnel grounds
because they were
despised in Indian
society and the siddhas
were viewed as failures,
marginal and defiled.*

— [6]

Poetry, song, and literature

Dyczkowski (1988: p. 26) holds
Hāla's Prakrit literature poem

the Gāthāsaptasati (third to fifth century CE) to be one of the first extant literary references to a Kapalika where in the poem the Kapalika, who is a female, anoints and besmears her body with the crematory ash from the funeral pyre of her recently deceased lover.^[16] This is a literary allusion to the anointing of 'sacred ash' (Sanskrit: bhasma; vibhuti) especially

associated with Shiva who applies it all over his body.

Dyczkowski (1988: p. 26) relates how Kṛṣṇa Miśra (c. 1050–1100) casts the character of a Kāpālika in his play, the Prabodhacandrodaya and then quotes verbatim a source that renders the creed of this character into English:

*"My charming
ornaments are made*

*from garlands of
human skulls." says the
Kāpālika, "I dwell in the
cremation ground and
eat my food from a
human skull. I view the
world alternately as
separate from God
(Īśvara) and one with
Him, through the eyes
that are made clear
with the ointment of*

*yoga... We (Kāpālikas)
offer oblations of
human flesh mixed with
brains, entrails and
marrow. We break our
fast by drinking liquor
(surā) from the skull of
a Brahmin. At that time
the god Mahābhairava
should be worshipped
with offerings of awe-
inspiring human*

*sacrifices from whose
severed throats blood
flows in currents."*[16]

In Vajrayana poetry, literature and song, particularly that of the 'songs of realization', charnel grounds are often described as containing "rivers of blood", "poisonous waterfalls", and depicted as localities containing dangerous wild beasts. The two truths

doctrine though iterates this view and when perceived differently, charnel grounds are peaceful places of beatific solitude and this chthonic symbolism and the twilight language and iconography accrues a rich polysemy. When perceived differently, the charnel grounds are places of 'peace' (Sanskrit: *shanti*), pleasant groves, populated by wildflowers and fruit.

Songbirds, tame lions and tigers, and the vast open vault of the sky, fruit and flowers are often used in Vajrayana iconography and poetry and Beer (1999)^[17] explains their symbolism and how they are understood in the tradition in fine detail. They are all included in depictions of the charnel ground.

The Upa-yoga scriptures first appeared in 'Mount Jakang

Chen' Tibetan: རི་བྱ་རྒྱང་ཙན་,

Wylie: *ri bya rkang can*

(alternate names: Riwo Jakang,

Mount Jizu) and the charnel

ground of Cool Grove Tibetan:

བསེལ་བའི་ཆལ་, Wylie: *bsil ba'i*

tshal.^[18] Cool Grove is also

known as 'Śītavana'

(Sanskrit).^[19]

Gray (undated: c. 2009)
provides an excellent survey of
chthonic charnel ground
accoutrement motif such as
skull imagery in the textual
tradition of the Yogini
tantras.^[20]

Baital Pachisi

- Baital Pachisi
- Somadeva

Beyond social convention

In the charnel grounds of Vajrayana, there are no social conventions to conform to and no distractions to be seduced by for the siddha.^[1] Dakas and dakinis gather there to celebrate ceremonial tsok 'feasts' (Sanskrit: ganachakra). The lion's roar of Dharma discourse resound as do the

liturgy and the specific
'hourglass drums' (Sanskrit:
damaru) of the chödpa and the
light of the inner 'joy of bliss'
(Sanskrit: ananda) radiates and
this dynamic movement is
represented iconographically by
the 'bliss-whirling' (Sanskrit:
ananda-chakra).

In his *Manual* on the practice of
the Longchen Nyingtik,

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche

holds that:

*"Right now, our minds
are very fickle.*

*Sometimes you like a
certain place, and it
inspires, and yet with
that same place, if you
stay too long, it bores
you. [...] As you practice
more and more, one day*

*this kind of habit, this
fickle mind will just go.
Then you will search for
the bindu interpretation
of the right place, and
according to the classic
tantric texts, that is
usually what they call
the “eight great charnel
grounds”. So then, you
have to go to a
cemetery, especially to*

one of the eight
cemeteries. There,
under a tree, in the
charnel ground,
wearing a tiger skin
skirt, holding a kapāla
and having this
indifference between
relatives and enemies,
indifference between
food and shit, you will
practise. Then your

bindu will flow. At that time, you will know how to have intercourse between emptiness and appearance."^[1]^[21]

In the life in which a pratyekabuddha attains the fruit of their 'path' (Wylie: lam), they are naturally drawn to charnel grounds. "When reflecting on the bones found there, the pratyekabuddha

inquire "Where do these bones come from?"^[1] This samyama (Sanskrit) on the bones awakens knowledge of their many lifetimes of investigation into the 'Twelve Links of Dependent Origination'. These twelve links then unfold in their mindstream as a 'blessing' (Sanskrit: adhishtana), in both forward and reverse sequence and on that foundation they

yield 'realisation' (Sanskrit:
siddhi).^[1]

Vajrayana iconography

The charnel ground, cremation ground and cemetery is evident as a specific region within wrathful Indo-Tibetan sand mandala iconography. As the anthropologist Gold (1994: p. 141) relates in his comparative study drawn from

his professional fieldwork into the symbolic universals of the sacred circles and sand-paintings of the Navajo and Tibetan peoples, parses the sacred precinct and motif of the charnel ground as a locality in the symbolic grammar of the Indo-Tibetan 'fierce yidam' or 'wrathful deity' (Sanskrit: heruka) sand mandala:

The third concentric ring [from the circumference] is optional, in that it is only used in mandalas representing the reality of deities of fierce power. It represents the charnel grounds wherein bodies are cut up and offered to birds of prey as a "sky

burial." This ring signifies the cutting away of the bones and flesh of illusion on the way to the primordial ground at the mandala's center. In some mandalas, it is positioned outside of the Mountain of Fire ring.

The region of the charnel grounds in many wrathful mandala often hold eight specific charnel grounds where certain key events take place in the life of Padmasambhava.^[22]

The Vajrayana yidam Citipati is said to be the Lord of Charnel Grounds.^[23]

Blood is thematic in Charnel
Ground iconography where it
may be understood as
lifeblood, a symbol of viscous
'compassion' (Sanskrit: karuna)
of 'sacrifice' (Sanskrit: yajna),
and attendant with the
symbolism of blood, bones
ground our shared humanity
and solidarity in the wider
Mandala of life and the ancient
lineage of 'ancestors' from

which all sentient beings are of lineal descent.

The tradition and custom of the 'sky burial' (Tibetan: *jhator*) afforded Traditional Tibetan medicine and thangka iconography such as the 'Tree of physiology.' with a particular insight into the interior workings of the human body. Pieces of the human skeleton were employed in ritual tools

such as the skullcup, thigh-
bone trumpet, etc.

The 'symbolic bone ornaments'
(Skt: *aṣṭhiamudrā*; Tib: rus pa'i
rgyan phyag rgya) are also
known as "mudra" or 'seals' are
also known as 'charnel ground
ornaments'. The Hevajra Tantra
identifies the Symbolic Bone
Ornaments with the Five
Wisdoms and Jamgon Kongtrul
in his commentary to the

Hevajra Tantra explains this further.^[24]

The important Varnamala (or 'garland of bija phonemes' in twilight language is iconographically represented by a 'garland of severed heads or skulls' (Sanskrit: Mundamala).

Padmasambhava

Beer (1999: pp. 277–278) relates how Padmasambhava received the siddhi of the kīla

transmission from a gigantic
scorpion at the charnel ground
of Rajgriha:

*The sting of the
scorpion's whip-like tail
transfixes and poisons
its prey, and in this
respect it is identified
with the wrathful
activity of the ritual
dagger or kīla.*

*Padmasambhava's
biography relates how
he received the siddhi of
the kīla transmission at
the great charnel
ground of Rajgriha
from a gigantic
scorpion with nine
heads, eighteen pincers
and twenty-seven eyes.
This scorpion reveals
the kīla texts from a*

*triangular stone box
hidden beneath a rock
in the cemetery. As
Padmasambhava reads
this terma text
spontaneous
understanding arises,
and the heads, pincers,
and eyes of the scorpion
are 'revealed' as
different vehicles or
yanas of spiritual*

*attainment. Here, at
Rajgriha,
Padmasambhava is
given the title of 'the
scorpion guru', and in
one of his eight forms
as Guru Dragpo or
Pema Drago ('wrathful
lotus'), he is depicted
with a scorpion in his
left hand. As an emblem
of the wrathful kīla*

transmission the image of the scorpion took on a strong symbolic meaning in the early development of the Nyingma or 'ancient school' of Tibetan Buddhism...".

—[25]

Eight great charnel grounds

The 'Eight Great Charnel

Grounds (Sanskrit:

aṣṭamahāśmāśāna; Tibetan:

དུར་ཁྱོད་ཆེན་པོ་བརྟུན། Wylie: *dur*

khrod chen po brgyad)^[26]

'The Most Fierce'

'The Most Fierce' (Tibetan:

གཏུམ་བྱ།, Wylie: *gtum drag*)^[27]

'Dense Thicket'

'Dense Thicket' (Tibetan: ཚང་
ཚེང་འབྲིགས་པ།, Wylie: *tshang*
tshing 'khrigs pa)^[27]

'Dense Blaze'

'Dense Blaze' (Tibetan: འབར་
འབྲིགས་པ།, Wylie: *'bar 'khrigs*
pa)^[27]

'Endowed with Skeletons'

'Endowed with Skeletons'

(Tibetan: ཀེང་རུས་ཙན, Wylie:
keng rus can)^[27]

'Cool Forest'

'Cool Forest' or 'Cool Grove'

(Sanskrit: Śītavana; Devanagari:
शीतवन; Tibetan: བསྐལ་བུ་ཚལ,
Wylie: *bsil bu tshal*)^[27]

'Black Darkness'

'Black Darkness' (Tibetan: མུན་

པ་ནག་པོ།, Wylie: *mun pa nag*

po)^[27]

'Resonant with "Kilikili"'

'Resonant with "Kilikili"'

(Tibetan: ཀི་ལི་ཀི་ལིར་སྒྲ་སྒྲོག་པ།,

Wylie: *ki li ki lir sgra sgrog pa*)^[27]

'Wild Cries of "Ha-ha"'

'Wild Cries of "Ha-ha"' (Tibetan:

ཧ་ཧ་མྱོད་པ།, Wylie: *ha ha rgod pa*)^[27]

Charnel ground relics

Dudjom et al. (1991: p. 626

History) relates how "earth, stone, water, and wood"

gathered from The Eight Great Charnel Grounds and

auspicious objects such as the

flesh of a seven-times-born
Brahmana and 'relics' (Sanskrit:
Śarīra) of the Tathagatha
amongst other items were used
to sculpt a statue of 'Yangdak
Heruka' (Wylie: yang dag
heruka; Sanskrit:
Viśuddhaheruka)^[28] modelled
on Zurcungpa (1014–1074 CE;
alt. Zurcung Sherap-tra)^[29]
holding the aspect of the yidam
after a vase empowerment was

given to the sculptors by the
"master" (Zurcungpa):

*The sculptors displayed
great devotion, so first
of all the master gave
them the vase
empowerment of the
glorious Yangdak
Heruka. They prepared
a mixture which
combined relics from*

*the Tathagata's
remains; the flesh of
one who had been born
as a brahman seven
times; earth, stone,
water, and wood from
the eight charnel
grounds; a variety of
precious gems; and
sacramental medicine
refined by the*

*awareness-holders of
India and Tibet.*

— [30]

See also

- Shiva
- Digambara
- Longchen Nyíngtik

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